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# Arabia Online: Answering the Call of the Holy Land
By R.W Burniske

*A teacher learns a lesson on using technology to serve humanity, rather than forcing humanity to serve technology.*

It appears the Holy Land is a popular Y2K destination.

However, many of the pilgrimages taking place, from zealots anticipating a messiah to a Pope seeking peace and reconciliation, are a response to the gospel of *empathy* rather than a quest for the holy grail of *integration.*

I learned this during a recent visit of my own.

I'd been asked to lead a seminar at Birzeit University in Ramallah, a city in the West Bank. Forty students and educators gathered for a week-long "Introduction to the Internet for Teaching and Learning" sponsored by the World Links for Development Program (WorLD). Though most of the participants had not used the Internet before, it didn't take long for them to raise questions that took us beyond technical concerns, illustrating the complexity and delicacy of this particular *integration.*

"How do we send email in Arabic?" someone asked. I looked up from a monitor where I'd been helping three teachers subscribe to a free email service, tracing the question back to its source. Majd, a math and computer teacher from Gaza, peered at me from beneath her veil. Every face in the room was suddenly trained upon me. I didn't want to disappoint them, but neither could I feign an answer. My credibility was still suffering from the postponement of a coffee break that they considered a call to prayer.

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"I'm not sure," I said, "but let's see if we can figure something out, OK?"

Like many questions raised in a networked computer classroom, I hadn't anticipated this one. Perhaps I'd been too busy thinking about other questions. Or else it had never mattered to my students before. Regardless, I couldn't dodge it now, nor could I deny that Majd's question addressed far more than a technical problem. It spoke to a fundamental, human concern: the desire to speak in one's own "voice." In order to accomplish that, Majd and her colleagues needed to use their native tongue. Asking them to do otherwise would mean imposing two foreign media: the English language and networked, computer technology. Clearly, there were important personal, cultural and political concerns implicit in this "technical" question.

The significance of this may be lost upon the privileged ones who use their native language for online communication. Consider, though, the viewpoint of educators in the Palestine Authority; for them, the selection of texts, curricula and technology involves far more than "technical" decisions. The Christian and Islamic teachers I worked with have seldom had a strong sense of ownership in their educational programs. Historically, they've been compelled to use the language, textbooks or technology of a foreign culture. The last thing I wanted was to subject them to another form of cultural imperialism.

Instead, I wanted to teach them how to use computers and the World Wide Web to create their own electronic mailing lists, design their own web pages as online resources, and initiate their own telecollaborative projects. I wanted, in effect, to introduce them to new technologies that would provide a medium for the expression of their individual and collective "voice." Yet, while thinking of such lofty goals I had overlooked the pragmatic concern of composing and communicating in Arabic.

This wasn't a contrived problem-solving activity; it was an authentic learning experience for everyone involved. Solving the riddle of Arabic email seemed critical to our collaborative efforts. After all, if I couldn't help them bend technology to the will of their native tongue, how could I inspire them to overcome other "technical" challenges? For all I knew, perhaps someone at Birzeit University had already solved this particular problem. I turned to one of the computer lab assistants, a savvy webmaster named Osama. Did he know of an email software application that would enable writers to type their messages in Arabic?

"No," Osama said. "I'm sorry."

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Perhaps there was a Middle Eastern version of *Babelfish* (www.babelfish.com), an online service that enabled translation to and from Arabic?

"No," he said, shaking his head, "Not yet." Nevertheless, Osama did know a few word processing packages that supported Arabic keyboards and composition. Why not write the messages as text files, save them within the word processing application, and send them as file attachments? He offered this suggestion with a nonchalant shrug, then smiled and tempered his counsel with a deferential qualifier.

"I think that way works best - *in sha'allah.*"

In the days that followed, I would introduce students and teachers from Gaza and the West Bank to various "search engines" that helped them locate online resources concerning issues they cared about, like water conservation in the Middle East. I also taught them how to use hypertext markup language to create web pages that served pedagogical and curricular purposes. Finally, I introduced the concept of telecollaborative, project-based learning, and helped them brainstorm ideas for online discussions ranging from "The Microsoft Monopoly" to "Tourism in Palestine."

But for all that, what seemed to please them most was learning how to compose a message in Arabic and send a copy of it to their colleagues as an email attachment. This reinforced an important, though frequently neglected, lesson: *telecollaboration is not about computers.* It's about learning how to use technology to serve humanity, rather than forcing humanity to serve technology. It's also about helping people discover their own voice and put it to good use. Perhaps the first, and best use of that voice is ensuring that global, online discourse helps integrate diverse people without annihilating their respective cultures.

*In sha'allah!*

R.W. Burniske is the author of *Literacy in the CyberAge: Composing Ourselves Online* (SkyLight, 2000) and co-author of *Breaking Down the Digital Walls: Learning to Teach in a Post-Modem World (SUNY Press, 2001).*

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